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Yes, You Too Can “Win in China”: An Interview with Filmmaker Ole Schell

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By Dustin Wright

There has understandably been no shortage of commentary on China’s rapid economic development. Much like Japan’s economic “miracle” of the last century, this other industrialization in East Asia has generated considerable discussion, both in academia and popular media. No doubt, much of the discussion rests on a healthy crop of [skepticism](#) regarding the actual sustainability of China’s growth. However, though export growth has slowed since the boom apex in 2007, the country’s economy is nonetheless continuing to grow and many observers maintain that China is surviving the global recession [better](#) than any other major economy.

But as both domestic and foreign observers continue to watch China’s economic growth, it follows that we should want to know more about the individuals behind it, the entrepreneurial cogs in the increasingly battery-powered wheel. [In Shanghai](#), *China Beat* contributor Anna Greenspan called the city’s street vendors “the most entrepreneurial and creative sector of society.” One way to see how the average person—a Shanghai street vendor perhaps—views the growth is to take a look at what they watch on TV when they go home at night.



Back in 2007, in an entertaining piece, James Fallows [reported](#) on the Chinese game show “Ying Zai Zhongguo,” or “Win in China.” The TV show has immense popularity in China, generating ratings that make the Super Bowl seem like a city council meeting on your local public access channel. On [his blog](#), Alec Ash spoke with one of the show’s fans.

The premise will be familiar to American reality TV fans: entrepreneur saplings compete for prize money put up by some of China’s most successful entrepreneurs-turned-venture-capitalists, who also serve as the show’s panel of judges. Promoting your business plan, displaying business acumen that would thrill any MBA student, exposing your competitor’s lack of experience and undermining their qualifications are all keys to winning a chunk of the prize money, which totals over USD \$5 million.

Filmmaker Ole Schell, son of renowned Sinologist Orville Schell, has profiled the show in a new documentary, also called “[Win in China](#).” The filmmaker recently posted a [great piece](#) at CNN’s AC360

blog, where he describes meeting up with one of “Win’s” successful contestants, now putting his prize money to use with a lingerie business. Here, Ole Schell talks with us about the film.

Dustin Wright: Can you tell us what this film is about?

Ole Schell: “Win in China” is about the entrepreneurial revolution happening in China now and its ultimate overt manifestation on China Central Television (CCTV). We follow not only the entrepreneurs competing on the show, but what it means historically.

Despite “Win’s” overt boosterism of the marketplace and capitalism, it was nonetheless on state-run television, CCTV, with the apparent blessing of the Chinese government media watchdog, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. So, that is to say the least a little ironic.

DW: What trends in Chinese society really stood out when you were filming this documentary?

OS: Aside from the obvious trends of almost everyone being an entrepreneur and the streets of every major city being lined with construction cranes as far as the eye can see, several things indeed stood out:

The businessman is the new icon. I saw some of these guys mobbed like rock stars by young people with business plans and dreams. You go to any highway and images of the entrepreneurs as the hero on billboards have replaced imagery of Chairman Mao and glorified images of workers. If you look at the new CCTV building in Beijing or look at the view from the Bund in Shanghai, you see how modern parts of China are. It’s frightening to see just how far the West is falling behind.

DW: Who watches this show in China? Is it only middle-class urbanites or does the show have popularity outside of the cities? How many people watch this show?

OS: On CCTV2 and DVD “Win in China” [the TV show] had over 200,000,000 viewers. People of all stripes in China are becoming entrepreneurs both small and large. You hear stories of people who make a business out of collecting coal that falls off a truck at a weigh station, one piece at a time, or a guy who had a contract to take urine from restaurants and port-o-potties and then purify and sell it to a pharmaceutical company. Then there are young men who are totally uneducated but started selling pot stickers on the street, then motorcycle parts, then cars, then real-estate, becoming billionaires by their 30th birthday.

These stories are not uncommon in China. So I think “Win” appealed to anyone with a dream.

DW: In the United States, many people enthusiastically believe that they can jump socioeconomic barriers, as long as they are willing to work hard. How does this compare to China? Does the “entrepreneurial spirit” differ?

OS: Yes, this is similar and I would argue that this sentiment is even stronger in China. People are by and large comfortable in the United States whereas people in China are often very hungry. Things move so fast in China now and practicing business there is a way to get ahead and advance themselves very quickly.

Until you go there it is hard to fathom the true entrepreneurial energy that permeates around every corner. It is a really exciting place to be with so many opportunities.

DW: It seems that anytime we discuss China and “free market” capitalism, we inevitably bring up notions of change within China and the transformation or weakening of the CCP. Having met many young entrepreneurs, along with pillars in Chinese business, like the founder of Alibaba Group, Jack Ma, do you think the motivations and goals of China’s capitalists are anything but creating wealth?

OS: Honestly, I think that despite the lip service given to bettering the country and creating jobs to push China forward, most but not all entrepreneurs are out to better themselves. There is a lot of talk of helping China and doing charitable work but I think this is sort of a window dressing to excuse the capitalism. There are still fading vestiges of communism that this talk must satisfy in some way. Remember it was not that long ago that all of this private enterprise was totally forbidden.

That being said, someone like Jack Ma, who acted as a judge on the show, really had the best interests of the country at heart. He really believed in informing his countrymen about business in hopes of creating more jobs and modernizing his country. I believed him when he said that greater transparency in business and would lead to greater transparent modernization in China.

DW: Do you think the global recession has changed the goals or expectations of China's entrepreneurs?

OS: I was there when the crisis first hit and it slowed things down for a little while, but there is such an entrepreneurial fervor in China that it seems things have rebounded. HSBC bank just predicted the Chinese GDP would grow by 8.1 percent for 2009. There is such an entrepreneurial wave over there and so many people joining the middle class as consumers, workers, and job creators, that it seems China has weathered the storm better than the West. China seems to also have been more successful with its stimulus package than we have been so far in the US.

DW: Your [last documentary](#) was a behind-the-scenes look at the often exploitative world of fashion modeling. Any similarities between the aspirations of a young model in New York and the aspirations of a budding business owner in Beijing?

OS: Perhaps, yes. Some of the young women in our film, "Picture Me," came from abject poverty in Eastern Europe or elsewhere and were taken or sent to the big city to bring their whole families to a better life. This is also common in China. One person will get rich and then bring his whole family along with him. In both worlds you can succeed very fast, but of course neither world is without its pitfalls.

Learn more about the documentary at www.wininchinamovie.com

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